The Unfulfilled Dreams of Democracy

Mzukisi Qobo

South Africa: The Present as History by John S. Saul and Patrick Bond

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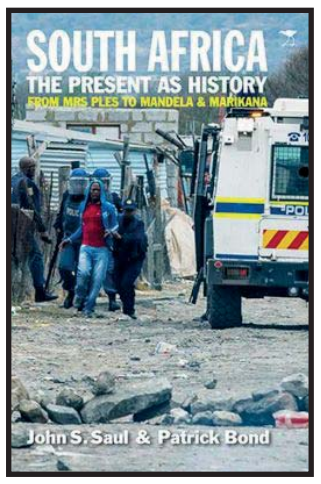
It is now three years since the police gunned down 34 mine workers in Marikana, a mining area that is situated along the platinum belt in the Northwest province of South Africa. This incident took place against the background of boiling hostilities, initially triggered by strikes over low wages. This was also punctuated by violent tensions between two rival unions – the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), which is an affiliate of the Congress of Trade Unions (COSATU), an ANC-aligned federation; and the Association of Mine Workers and Construction Union (AMCU), an independent and radical union whose leader had broken away from NUM. The employer – London Mining (or Lonmin in short) – boasted as one of its shareholders a leading figure of the ruling African National Congress and currently South Africa's deputy President, Cyril Ramaphosa. An important detail is the fact that Ramaphosa was once General Secretary of NUM. While Ramaphosa and senior state officials were exonerated by a commission of inquiry that was appointed by President Jacob Zuma to conduct an investigation into developments around the Marikana massacre, many questions regarding the line of authority to undertake such a large-scale violence remain unanswered. What is clear, and this is the point made towards the end of the book under review, is that the ruling ANC has become unhinged from its intimate links with the poor and downtrodden. The interests of its leaders and factions that are drawing benefits from business links have taken centre stage.

The tragic events of Marikana cast a gloomy cloud over South Africa. It drowned the innocence and idealism that was brought about by the first democratic elections in 1994 with the unveiling of a new constitution with a Bill of Rights in 1996. The values that the ANC once professed are no longer the guiding compass of its governance. It is worth pointing out that the Marikana incident was by no means an isolated one; but it was the first that witnessed vicious state-sanctioned violence unleashed upon workers who were voicing their grievances for higher wages. Mine workers in South Africa still live under wretched conditions and earn a pittance in comparison with workers in other mining jurisdictions, while mine bosses pay themselves extravagant bonuses.

At any given month in South Africa, there are various demonstrations of dissent by a public that has become dissatisfied with the poor state of public service delivery, rising corruption, and underperformance of local government authorities and other state agencies. Social tensions have been compounded by the sluggish growth of the economy (at 2% or below in the past three years), with levels of inequality unparalleled in the history of the country. South Africa is currently the most unequal country in the world.

The South Africa of today is not the South Africa that was characterised by boundless optimism in 1994. There is a feeling that ordinary citizens occupy a secondary place to those who are politically connected and have found a way of using their political credentials to climb the social ladder either through bureaucratic channels or using the Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) scheme.



John Saul and Patrick Bond bring all of this under intense scrutiny. They offer a critical observation of how the governing elites in South Africa have veered off course and abandoned the values they professed in the early 1990s. This is not a book that deals with abstract ideas, although it is suffused with scholarship. Most importantly, it presents the real human struggles at the heart of a changing South African political economy and is written from a perspective that is sympathetic to the socially excluded.

Saul and Bond's account of South African history begins at the moment the Dutch captain Jan Van Riebeeck landed on the Cape shores in 1652, through the assertion of English dominance, especially intensified with the discovery of diamonds in the Kimberly area and gold in the Transvaal, up to the 1970s and beyond. The discovery of gold and diamonds transformed South Africa's economy in ways that were never imagined before. Before mining, the country was pastoral, the predominant sector of the economy being wool and wine trading in the Cape, and the political system fragmented. The discovery of minerals transformed British interest in South Africa from just being preoccupied with securing sea lanes, with the Simons Town naval base as a flagship, to a more commercially and politically-oriented obsession. Kimberly and Transvaal would turn out to become the battle grounds of power struggle between the English and the Boers (Afrikaners). It also laid the seeds for what was later to become the apartheid system under successive Nationalist Party governments.

Conquest and dispossession of the African population became the essential feature of the construction of modern South Africa and its political institutions. Despite the Anglo-Boer War, which lasted no more than 3 years, much of what characterised South Africa's social relations was the assertion of racial dominance over the black majority by successive white minority governments. Even after the end of the Anglo-Boer war, there were intermittent tensions between the Afrikaner political elite and English capital over the contribution of the major mining companies towards a developmental strategy to build state-driven industrialisation and empowerment of the Afrikaner business interests. Yet still, the two groups shared a similar view regarding the subjugation of the black majority, regarding them as less of a political agency and more of a reserve labour to serve white men's economic needs.

The mining activities have played a pivotal role in the structuring of the country's political economy up to the present. South Africa's spatial organisation, infrastructure, and social relations were fundamentally determined by the industry. Various discriminatory laws, from the heyday of British imperialism in the 19th century to the emergence of official apartheid, initiated by the Nationalist Party government in 1948, are well summarised in the work.

The work also provides a rich historical context to introduce a complex discussion on the emergence of a counter-movement in the form of the African National Congress, which is today the governing party, and various agencies of resistance, such as trade unions and other civic movements. The ANC in particular evolved as a group of largely missionary-educated and conservative elite that sought inclusion in the franchise.

The earlier ANC resistance was carried out not so much to overhaul the political and economic template, but to achieve reformist objectives that would, for example, see qualified franchises retained and extended nationally. Sending deputations that expressed allegiance to the British Queen was for some time the ANC's preferred method of protest.

Over a long period of time, especially between the 1920s and the mid-1940s, with growing political consciousness and gradual radicalisation, the organisation would assume a broad-based appeal and articulated universalist discourse of rights for the African people in general. Township unrest in the 1940s expressed this incipient radicalisation, culminating in the Defiance Campaign of 1952 and later the banning of the ANC and other organisations. This interregnum was also shaped by the show of militancy expressed through the black workers strikes in the late 1940s.

The book avoids a one-sided account of a neat path of resistance against apartheid and capitalism; instead, it takes a critical look at the tensions that were present within the trade union movement and the liberation movement both before and during its three decades in exile. Much of the historical detail that the authors cover in this book has been adequately discussed by various historical or political economy texts before. What is however fresh about this work is the engaging and consistently critical style with which it is written. For readers who are not familiar with this history – or who have only been exposed to a different perspective of it – the book is an important reference point for an alternative analysis of South African history. It paces through the various phases of South African history, and tries to cover as much ground as possible, connecting the past and the present.

Apart from this, there are a number of gaps in the work that are worth highlighting. The first is that the discussion of the early history of South Africa does not always hang together coherently, in a way that takes the reader along to demonstrate a connection between the current political settlement in South Africa and the evolution of the political culture and systems in the past. With the exception of the substantial section – the first quarter of the book – that deals with the pre-1970 period, the rest of the work is presented as individual essays that lack a common thread. In fact, there is not one distinguishable argument, but many. The uneven voices of the two authors interrupt the flow, the tone and the coherence of the work.

Some assertions in this work are weakly substantiated and rushed. To take one example: the bold assertion that the authors make that '…the ANC has merely subordinated the others to its own option of party self-aggrandizement and global neoliberalism' implies that other social movements lacked an independent agency and self-determination and were simply corralled by the ANC to its own narrow agenda.

The assertion that the ANC initiated political demobilisation could have been buttressed by allusion to the instruments through which the ANC achieved such demobilisation. Various leaders of the United Democratic Front (UDF), and broadly the Mass Democratic Movement, voluntarily abandoned the path of civic mobilisation in favour of the quasi-modern hegemonic political party that the ANC was to become. If grassroots activists, and leaders of the UDF, did not acquiesce in absorption into ANC's chosen political strategies, they would have simply continued or given birth to similarly powerful social movements that do not follow the ANC's embrace of parliamentary processes.

Saul and Bond over-romanticise the UDF and grassroots movements. It is important to point out that the UDF was not entirely unadulterated. Various excesses were committed in

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